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Staging Polish Migration in Transcultural Drama: The Question of Multiple Language Use in Great Britain's Theatre

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The theatrical plays I have chosen for this particular overview cannot be easily classified according to the linguistic and cultural groups they might belong to. Even though they were staged across Great Britain (and some also in Poland), they exist in both contexts simultaneously, being in an imaginary, intercultural borderland that lacks any sort of specific geographical location. This is a space between languages, cultures and traditions, one I have come to call the “space of transcultural idioms.”¹ It is the product of a new, “third value” creation arising out of a remixing of something generally understood as native culture (in this case from Poland) and other local cultures in the “destination” country.²

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1 See Elwira Grossman, “Towards the Literature of Transcultural Idioms: Ewa/Eva Stachniak and Lisa Appignanesi,” in *Displaced Women*, ed. Lucia Aiello, Joy Charnley and Mariangela Palladino (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 61–69.

2 See essay by Elwira Grossman, „Kategoria polskości w formacie transkulturowym,” in: *Literatura polska w świecie*, vol. IV, ed. Romuald Cudak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo GNOME, Uniwersytet Śląski, 2012), 361–371.

Of course, the place where a given play is staged is always defined (though not always limited to one location), but I am here more concerned with multi-cultural determinants relating to the world of the stage, such as mono-, bi- or multilingualism, the “otherness” of theatrical conventions and accents, and by accents I mean something broadly understood, heard on stage in spoken Polish and English, but referring to both the linguistic and the emotional sphere. Hence the title of this work.³ Because, unlike migration literature, the “accent” in transcultural theatre (and film) defines the eventual aesthetic with no less communicative impact than the language itself, and definitively colours the performative dimension of the whole performance.⁴ Following Mieke Bal’s methodological observations, I will return to these migratory aesthetic determinants again in my discussion, but here I will list a selection of performances which represent Polish migration in a transcultural format, in a post-2014 British context, and in an aesthetically diverse way. These are:

1) *The Polish Play* (2008), staged by the touring company *Farnham Maltings* in England (February 2008) and in Scotland (April 2008).

2) The work of the Polish émigré theatre group Gappad,⁵ described as a “Polish-Scottish theatre,” active in Scotland from July 2006 to autumn 2011. Its founder was Agnieszka Bresler, and its artistic director from 2007 was Robert Przekwas. In the course of its theatrical activities, Gappad staged a total of six premieres: *RE-ID* (2007), *As You Always Do* (2008), *Hear Me* (2009), *Jordan* (2010), *Family Voices* (2010) and finally *Spina/Backbone* (2011).⁶

3) *Tu i Teraz* (*‘Here and Now’*) is a bilingual performance based on a play by Nicola Werenowska, directed by Sam Potter, staged in London’s Hampstead Theatre on the 19th of December 2012 and in The Nuffield Theatre and The Mercury Theatre in 2013.⁷

3 This graphical description of the word is taken from Edward Balcerzan, who uses it to refer to a different context, see: „Jedno- oraz dwu(wielo)języczność literackich »światów«,” *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2009): 9–20.

4 Mieke Bal discusses the poetics of linguistic accents in “Translating Translation,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1/6 (2007): 109–124.

5 This group’s name derives from the names of people involved in their stage debut: Gosia, Agnieszka, Pola, Piotr, Anita and Dominik.

6 Agnieszka Bresler also produced two solo shows: *Starsza Pani* [*The Old Lady*, 2010], a play developed with the Italian company Teatro La Madrugada, as well as *11/11*, ‘a poetic encounter’ based on the same motifs as *The Old Lady*, but staged in Polish as part of the celebrations of the 11th of November at the General Sikorski House in Glasgow. This solo show was based on poems by Małgorzata Zbudniewek.

7 Information about the cast and complete authorship of the text can be found in: Nicola Werenowska, *Tu i Teraz* (*‘Here and Now’*) (Portsmouth: Playdead Press, 2013)

4) *Bloody East Europeans* is a play that sits between the conventions of burlesque and musical, performed by the Ukrainian theatrical group Molodyi Teatr from London, presented as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (25-29th of August 2015), as well as in Glasgow's The Milk Café (23rd of August). The motif of Polish migrants and their native tongue feature strongly in the performance, in spite of its title indicating a slightly broader perspective: *Bloody East Europeans*. The play was written by Uilleam Blacker, a Scot who describes himself with some pride in a press release for the show as "an honorary eastern European."⁸

The above list is not comprehensive in terms of presenting plays relating to transitional identities, as staged between 2004-2015. There were both more theatrical companies and performances, but in selecting the above examples I was mainly led by their aesthetic variety, the presence of two or more languages in the scripts and shows, and the availability of research materials.⁹ There can be little doubt that the variety of all the selected examples is closely related to the context in which they were created, but they are seen by viewers who do or do not share the transcultural space created and presented on stage. What then happens to the way a play is received, when that play does not always know its audience? What sort of function does it serve, if the artistic criteria of the way it is judged are either purely accidental or destined for a completely different context? And finally: how does their quality manifest itself when we are dealing with such vague criteria and lack any sort of singular cultural sense of belonging? I will attempt to address these questions by analysing the above examples.

The Polish Play was written and directed by Gavin Stride, originally intended to be staged in village halls. Utilising a Pirandello-style theatre, as exemplified by *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Stride mixes reality with theatrical fiction in way that is so effective that for the first few minutes of the performance it is hard to tell whether the person asking the audience about a Polish play, which is about to be staged somewhere nearby, is an eccentric audience member or one of the performers. The play in itself is more of a happening/local event than a play in the strictest sense, because it introduces two characters,

8 This information comes from a Summer 2015 press release relating to the show, *Bloody Eastern Europeans*, introducing the authors of the Edinburgh Fringe performance as follows: *The play is written by Uilleam Blacker, a Scot and honorary eastern European, and directed by Olesya Khromeychuk, a real eastern European.*

9 I would like to thank Joanna Kosmalka, Agnieszka Bresler, Robert Przekwas, Kasia Kokowska, Gavin Stride, Nicola Werenowska and Uilleam Blacker for the help they have given me in collating materials, as well as allowing access to texts and recordings, without which this article would not have been possible.

speaking with strange accents, into the world of a small village community: a father, played by Michael Strobel, concerned about his daughter's life, and the daughter Marta, played by the Polish actress Agnieszka Korzuszek. Marta arrives in England to work as an au pair, and her naivety, contrasted with the worldly experience of her father, becomes a test both of the audience's empathy and of a community's ability to respond to new arrivals. Listening in on a conversation between Stanislaw (sic!) and Marta, the audience discovers their real motives and fears, along with the dreams migrants have about a better way of life. Art allows us to become familiar with what is alien, operating on different levels. It is also an attempt to de-demonise the rhetoric used in the press and in everyday anecdotal conversations relating to the wave of migration after 2004 ("they only come for the money, taking our work and our benefits, scrounging off of us").

The scenic, utopian world of the play aims to re-evaluate these sorts of attitudes, suggesting that human beings should be helpful, not harmful, to one another. Stride appears to be convincing us that we all emerge from one land (be it Eng/land or Po/land),¹⁰ because we live on the same planet Earth and represent the species *homo sapiens*, factors that precede our belonging to nations and ethnic groups. The play is, in terms of this approach, rather extraordinary, for although it is written by a Briton, it does not repeat the time-worn plot of an emigre's eventual return to their country of origin.¹¹ Quite the opposite, and it introduces characters sustained by vitality and purpose. Such a play (although it is hard not to accuse it of wishful thinking) can indeed change perceptions, for it trusts Britons and treats their hospitality as part of their innate character, without ever doubting its validity. No one accuses anyone of anything here. Improvisations between the actors and the audience are written into the script, which ends with the beginning of a shared meal, a moment of mutual curiosity and intimacy. Actors encourage the audience to talk, disturbing the staged fiction and changing it into a world that surrounds all the participants, here and now. This is how the ending is presented in the stage directions:

If this was a theatrical play, it would end at this point, but that is not the case here. Agnieszka Korzuszek remained in England in order to become an actress. Her

¹⁰ This phrase has been used by Bogdan Czaykowski in his discussion with Adam Czerniawski (*O poezji, nostalgii, krytykach i kryteriach rozmawiają Bogdan Czaykowski i Adam Czerniawski*, ed. Magdalena Rabizo-Birek (Toronto-Rzeszów: Polski Fundusz Wydawniczy w Kanadzie-Stowarzyszenie Literacko-Artystyczne Fraza, 2006), 148).

¹¹ *The Road Home* (2007) by Rose Tremain illustrates such a story line.

father returned home. THE NARRATOR LEAVES, AND AGNIESZKA TELLS THE STORY OF HER FATHER'S RETURN. THE END. (28)¹²

In the opinion of the actor playing the Polish father, *The Polish Play* is "the most original, brave and innovative weaving of cultures." The authenticity of this "weaving" is cemented by the use of a Polish actress in the other key role. Korzuszek, being a migrant herself, often tells her own "true story" after the performance. In Sarah Redhead's review of the play, she quotes Strobel: "Once the play is finished, it is common for people to remain, talking. It is thought-provoking, though in a very subtle way."¹³ In the words of Gavin Stride,

What's more, the audience in a village is not just an "arts" audience, so companies develop theatre that has the potential to connect with the whole community. This search for convivial, inclusive events is the greatest strength of the work. ... With this in mind, we have created *The Polish Play* [which] sets out to get the audience to talk and listen, not to us, but to each other. The piece incorporates home-movie footage played against some strung-up white sheets ... a window onto another, vanishing world and typical of a generous-hearted, guileless evening.¹⁴

One of the greatest strengths of the piece is how well the female role is developed, the director allowing her to become a mediator between languages and cultures, giving her absolute freedom to use Polish words where they emphasise the power of emotions, the authenticity of the character or the comic aspects of a given scene. Almost all of Marta's lines coming from off stage should – according to the script – be "in Polish" and improvised by the actress. The ever-present air of comedy and good humour percolate through cultural barriers. The success of the show is also evidence of how important it is to have roles written with bi-lingual actresses in mind, utilising their migration experiences and their accented speech, and in a way that adds to our enjoyment of the performance.

The Polish Play, though written with a local British audience in mind, fits into the field of meetings between two cultures and languages, which allows

12 I am quoting from the manuscript which, thanks to the generosity of its author, I have in my possession; the text has never been officially published.

13 Sarah Readhead, "The Polish Play review," *The List*, 24 April, 2008, accessed September 15, 2015 <https://www.list.co.uk/article/7914-the-polish-play/> See also Dominic Cavendish, "The Polish Play: such a sweet shambles," *The Telegraph*, 6 February 2008, accessed September 15, 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3670988/The-Polish-Play-Such-a-sweet-shambles.html>

14 Quoted in the review by Cavendish

us to better understand the “Other,” those human beings who come from a different society or ethnic group. The creation of a trans-cultural space in relation to village communities, which is as a rule missed out when it comes to socio-political analyses, or, for that matter, to literary works, is another significant aspect of this performance/event, adding to its unquestionable importance. It is further enhanced by the trust Stride has in his Polish actress, allowing her to improvise parts of the text. The significance of such a gesture has been noted by Eva Ulrike Pirker, who discusses a similar dramaturgical effect used by Mike Phillips in the migrant play *You Think You Know Me but You Don't*, yet from a different cultural context:

This process of appropriation is an important act of going beyond the contents of the script written by a Western European author not only *for* but also *about* an Eastern subject. The game of giving and receiving, of inventing/performing an “other” and of appropriating this other as one’s own creates a suggestive subtext to the main level of action.¹⁵

The bilingualism and transcultural aspect of this exceptional play is a challenge to the negative rhetoric of the mainstream press, relentlessly defining migration as a “problem.” Although the play was always aimed at rural audiences, I am willing to suppose that its power would not be diminished should it ever be staged in city theatres.

One decidedly city-based company is the Polish group *Gappad*, which delivers a different array of things to think about when it comes to bilingual stages with a Polish accent. Their activities are characterised by an incredible level of involvement and resilience, not only in the creation of high-quality theatre, but also in forcing through a theatrical tradition in the domain of an alien culture. A notable aspect of Polish theatrical achievements is the vision of a physical theatre: bio-mechanical, operating primarily with the body, along with gestures, symbols, light, sound and music. This is a tradition arising mainly out of the theatrical practice developed by Jerzy Grotowski, but it is not limited solely to his influence. The word, as understood in such theatre, is merely an add-on or a pointer, and more often than not secondary in importance. Although physical theatre performances emerge out of dramaturgical texts, which is what happened with performances such as *Hear Me* (2009), *Jordan* (2010) and *Family Voices* (2010), they treat the text loosely, fitting chosen elements in with the overall theatrical vision of the artists. It is therefore

¹⁵ Eva Ulrike Pirker, *You Think You Know Me But You Don't – An Introduction*, in: *Facing the East in The West*, ed. Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2010), 164.

difficult to come up with a clearer clash: British theatre (including its Scottish variants), which is mainly word-centered, and physical theatre emerging out of the homeland of the founders of *Gappad*.

There can be little doubt that *Gappad* has handled this clash with true aplomb over the six years they have been in existence. The group was never a company with full-time contracts and equipment, and the funds to rent rehearsal spaces and meeting rooms came from local grants, submitted by the company members themselves. They had no artistic agents or any other elements of creative industry infrastructure around them, having to be their own ship, rudder and captain, becoming in some way the embodiment of the Juliusz Osterwa theatrical ideal, although the clear difference was that Osterwa did not foresee theatrical companies operating in foreign cultural contexts. In our conversation held in Glasgow on 7 October 2015, the former artistic director, Robert Przekwas, recalled:

It all started with Agnieszka [Bresler], and I joined a year later. We were simply a group of young people in a foreign country who were missing theatre, lacking also some kind of personal and cultural fulfilment. Each one of us had come here after 2004, in order to earn money, so theatre was for us also a way to make friends and create networks. It was clear that something was eating away at us, and it seems a big part of that was about working through what that something might be. And that was how we started.¹⁶

The first performance of *RE-ID (RE-IDENTIFICATION)* took shape over a six-month period, in association with a young Scottish stage director Kat Harrison, who had graduated a year earlier, and the Polish composer Krzysztof Mielczarek. Taking part in the performance were Agnieszka Bresler, Pola Brejter, Piotr Kurjata, Dominik Dąbek, Anita Łenyk and Małgorzata Zbudniewek. After the Tron Theatre premiere in 2007, *Gappad* also showed it at the Edinburgh Fringe and at the Govan International Festival. The background for the show was the key question about identity: how do I change when the place called “home” is no longer where it used to be? The script was made up of fragments of conversations, letters and voices from Polish migrants in bi-lingual formats, intended to engage audiences in a migrant’s key dilemma: to return or to reconfigure one’s identity? What is interesting here is that the creators of the show were interested in themselves, in treating theatre as a space which served them first of all, and the audiences’ needs were only secondary.

¹⁶ All quotes come from my Glasgow conversation with Robert Przekwas and were authorised through our e-mail exchange in November the same year – Elwira Grossman.

Commenting on the decision to keep *RE-ID* bi-lingual, Bresler, then artistic director of the group, explained:

From the very beginning, I wanted to do a show that would be English and Polish at the same time. I wanted a Scottish person to sit next to a Polish person and they could both understand. If they get frustrated because they don't understand for 30 seconds, that's good, because that's exactly the feeling an immigrant experiences.¹⁷

The bilingualism of the text, with its fragmentary, non-linear character is also used in the show *As You Always Do* (2008)¹⁸, a title that can be taken as a playful travesty of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The play, featuring some dark and painful themes, refers to the murder of Angelika Kluk, committed in Glasgow by Peter Tobin. When her body was found, concealed beneath a church floor, a real-life horror turned into a media frenzy of exaggeration and deformed gossip about her lifestyle. The title of the play is a form of accusation of the passive attitudes readers had towards the narratives printed in the press, based often on stories invented by random people. It can also be read as a condemnation of the co-authoring of such narrations. We can hear the stories of disappeared individuals from various parts of the world, because the show – without the actual presence of the disappeared – is an attempt to come to their aid, through choreography and movement that conveys their subordination, their victimhood, and their mortality. And yet, in the end, this symbolic form of telling did not prove clear enough for reviewers. The performance was accused of lacking “the narrative strength to do more than suggest the issues it wants to look at – when you might hope for a more forceful exploration of them.” And so, paradoxically, its creators were accused of that which the *Gappad* team had set out specifically not to include in their work. On the other hand, the actors were praised, as were the choreographic arrangements and dramatic images, with the hope that future work by the company would enliven “the heart of Scotland's theatrical life.”¹⁹

It is difficult to judge how much the decisions regarding three more performances were in part an answer to the critical voices mentioned above, and

17 A conversation with Agnieszka Bresler, quoted in the review by Mark Fisher, “Dramatic Escape from No-Man's Land,” *The Scotsman*, 27 May, 2007, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/dramatic-escape-from-no-man-s-land-1-1419655>

18 The show had its premiere at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow in May of 2008, then was shown in June in Edinburgh, as part of Leith Festival and in October at the Festival of Independent Theatre in Poznan. Taking part were Agnieszka Bresler, Dominik Dąbek, Piotr Kurjata and Anna Nierobisz.

19 See Joyce McMillan, “Hear Me,” *The Scotsman*, 8 May 2009, accessed September 9, 2015, <https://joycemcmillan.wordpress.com/2009/05/08/hear-me/>

how much they were a natural evolution of the group's artistic expression. *Hear Me, Family Voices* and *Jordan* all, unlike the previous shows, utilised existing dramaturgical texts, without basing the theatrical vision on scripts developed by members of the company. This does not, however, mean that they possessed a narrative clarity demanded by local reviewers. In the first instance, the basis for the show was a play by Tadeusz Różewicz, *Witnesses or Our Small Stabilization*, in the second it was *Jordan*, written by Moira Buffini and Anna Reynolds.²⁰ *Jordan* is a play constructed around the confessions of a mother-murderess, based on a real story and written by both playwrights after they were released from prison, where they met and became long-term friends.²¹

Both *Family Voices*, directed by Iwona Głowińska, as well as the performance *Jordan* directed by Robert Przekwas, were staged only in English, but with an accent that added a very different dimension to both shows. It is a truism to say that the language used on stage becomes a symbol in all its aspects, and a fact that British culture has a unique approach to accents, seeing it as a marker of identity, origin and social status, hence it is all the harder to overlook this particular concern. Following the tenets of political correctness, we can try to pretend we do not hear accents any more (and this is how local reviewers heard things), but it is hard to assume that all audiences experienced the performance in the same generous spirit.²² This question is important to me, because speaking with a foreign accent (through the presence of Scottish theatre across the stages of the world) has meant that various ways of speaking now demand equal status, broadening the local space and expanding it into a new trans-cultural dimension. In a way, its presence in theatre has sanctioned migration (of both culture and life), bringing it closer to Scotland in a visible, convincing fashion. This artistic gesture is where the undervalued activity of *Gappad* has delivered, without our needing to ask whether the company was conscious of this or not.

When Magdalena Kaleta took up the challenge and played the main role in *Jordan*, she had already acted in the staging of *'e Polish Quine*, which was considered a success.²³ Taking on the character of a Polish woman coming to the

20 The play was first staged by the Baylis Theatre in London in 1992.

21 In the space of two months, the play was performed from the 11th to the 15th of May 2010, in the Tron theatre in Glasgow, and on the 19th of June in Rozy Art House in Edinburgh, garnering much acclaim.

22 That this was not so was clear from the comments made by audience members, which I overheard after the performance of *Hear Me*.

23 Mathew Zajac, "Dogstar Theatre Company," *The Scotsman*, 25 May, 2007, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/polished-production-1-748941#axzz30o0hiBIWI>

UK after World War II, she reclaimed the career she had previously discarded, which in turn helped her decide to stay in Scotland and continue acting as a profession.²⁴ The positive reviews *Jordan* garnered did make reference to the directorial style of Przekwas, which was deemed “polished, raw, detailed” and assigned it (oh the irony!) to the actor-director of Polish origin.²⁵

As much as the text of *Jordan* has been shortened somewhat, only about a third of the original play by Różewicz made it into the final version of the performance of *Hear Me* – the *Woman and Man* dialogue, along with the opening poem *Witnesses*. The main motif here is a lack of mutual understanding, when this confusion reaches beyond verbal communication or when, paradoxically, languages hinder rather than help the process of human interaction. The decision to omit bilingualism and stage the play entirely in English indicates the focus on a philosophical rather than verbal aspect of global human communication. This is further enhanced by the way the actors play their roles, their movement on stage, their symbolic body language, by the light and sound, and by Krzysztof Mielczarek’s music. Pondering on how we may reach other human beings, overcoming differences of gender, social view or philosophical attitude, becomes the main theme of this play. *Hear Me* seems to support the company’s belief that the value of truly artistic enterprises is to be found beyond political dimensions of reality, which is best left ignored. The irony of life, however, clearly disagrees with this perspective: the evident collusion of press silence over the accents of the actors on stage is itself a political commentary on their work.

In our Glasgow conversation, Robert Przekwas stressed how important the questions of communication were to the overall aims of the company:

We were above all led by the need to communicate. As migrants, we were relatively isolated; theatre gave us the ability to disrupt this distance. It also gave us the courage to try and establish a presence in an alien cultural context, a courage we had to inspire in each other quite often ... Our vision of theatre was based on a need to make contact, to open up and get to know each other: actor to actor, as well as actor to audience. British critics included us in the school of Grotowski theatre, but Grotowski is not the only person associated with physical theatre, seeing as for many other theatrical artists what counts most is the interaction between actor and audience, while the text is often only an excuse to try and establish this interaction.

24 See the text of the above mentioned article by Zajac, quoting from the actress.

25 Mark Fisher, “A Most Civil Arrangement/Jordan, theatre review,” *The Scotsman*, 14 May, 2010; also available 10 September 2015, <http://scottishtheatre.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/most-civil-arrangementjordan-theatre.html>

Being open to other people, which is the basis of what Gappad actors work towards on stage, has also influenced the various workshops they organised, aimed not only at actors, but also at local communities and Polish children.²⁶ Workshops and theatrical groups were supported by special visits by actors from Poland, such as Sławek Gostański from Teatr Węgały or Magdalena Mróz from Teatr Ciałonośny. Alongside the Poles, Gappad also collaborated with Robert Secchi and Raul Laiza from Teatro LaMadrugada (Italy), David WW Johnstone from Lazzi Experiment Arts, Antonia Doggett and Bill Wright.

As the third performance prepared by the same company, *Hear Me* produced some interesting outcomes regarding the places in which it was searching for answers. Joyce McMillan, writing about their development, summarises their efforts thus far:

... there's a feeling of a group of gifted young artists putting themselves through their paces, rather than throwing themselves into a performance that they want the world to see. Given this company's position, caught between two cultures, perhaps that sense of the provisional in their work is not surprising.²⁷

This reviewer's comments about Gappad as "a stage of theatrical shorts," "acting and stage practice," which lay the foundations for less "makeshift performance," seem key as they arise out of local expectations. The overall tone of the review is very positive and it is clear that Joyce McMillan appreciates the talent, effort and quality of their acting. Commenting earlier on Bresler's performance in *As You Always Do*, she notes that the actress has "extraordinary directness and flair" and "can change character with the completeness of a chameleon changing colour." Yet she ends her review of Gappad's Różewicz adaptation by stating that they "have still to find the project that will put them where they should be, somewhere near the heart of Scotland's theatrical life."²⁸

Hear me is thematically linked with *Family voices* with its search for mutual understanding, exploring the secretive and often paradoxical mechanisms of human communication (or its lack). Memory and thinking about that which has, once and for all, gone as well as that which is happening now or could happen in the future is also a common motif in both plays. Because Pinter's

26 Workshops called *HUNGER* (2010) were organised in Glasgow by Robert Przekwas, and children's workshops called *Devils with no land* (*Diabły nie z tej ziemi*) took place on the 3rd of December 2011 in Edinburgh, with R. Przekwas and D. Dąbek, initiated and directed by Iwona Głowińska-Denton.

27 See McMillan, "Hear Me."

28 McMillan, "Hear Me."

drama was staged in English and didn't touch on the topic of migration, the reviews contained cultural specificity when it came to how the text was approached: "Iwona Glowinska's production is so loudly expressionistic that Pinter's very English words are lost in the noise."²⁹ We are therefore dealing with another example of criticism based on the differences in cultural readings in the conventions presented by *Gappad*, hence the questioning of a different approach to the text which has failed to please critics whose tastes are shaped by generations of local traditions.

The show that crowned *Gappad's* creative output was the play *Spina/Backbone*, once again touching on the theme of migration and conventions from *RE-ID*. The titular *Spina* is a symbolic melting together of two languages: the core English word "spine" and the Polish ending with "-a." The play was inspired by a one-page text written by Kasia Kokowska, and translated into English by *Gappad* themselves. In it, we revisit the theme of immigrant experience, which seems to weigh people down rather than give them wings. In some way, the show closes the circle of what the company attempted to explore from its beginning, i.e., presenting the migration experience through the prism of martyrdom and persecution, which finally finds its full expression here. It is underscored by the presence of two languages, as well as background noises, which include the accordion, a Polish prayer and a traditional Slav folk song. Certain things are clearly expressed here, such as the white mask worn by one of the actresses (A. Bresler), which changes her face in one of the scenes and becomes a cleansing bowl in another. A secondary character (played by R. Przekwas), wrapped from the waist down in a white sheet, highlights experiences related to martyrdom, a struggle with invisible, yet physically tangible, nightmares, fears and compulsions. A character on the left of the stage lay prostrate beneath a cross, constantly trying to get up (P. Kurjata), an embodiment of both human fate and Christ-like suffering.³⁰ The play was not widely performed, staged on the fringes for small, select audiences, and so did not garner the same sort of reviews as *Gappad's* previous productions.

In 2012, Robert Przekwas took the decision to dissolve the company. Many of its members returned to Poland, others found themselves in diverse, if often related, jobs. Agnieszka Bresler works in a para-theatrical context with people on the margins of society, and it would be hard not to spot parallels between her migration experiences, where feelings of alienation and even exclusion

29 "Review of *Family voices*," *The Scotsman*, 21 June, 2010, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/theatre-reviews-family-voices-the-old-lady-the-umbilical-cord-1-813917#axzz3oohiBIWI>

30 A shorter, five minute version of the show is available for viewing on YouTube, see: <https://youtu.be/rjLrz-TWy3Q>

figure strongly, and her current activities. When, during the conversation with Robert Przekwas, I asked why among those taking part in the workshops he organised there were no Scots or Britons, but many representatives of other ethnic groups (Poles included), he replied that he hadn't given this much thought, but added after a while:

Perhaps it was easier for us to talk to those who were in a similar situation to us. It is easier for them to communicate with us too. Perhaps it is too difficult for us to reach Scots? Perhaps we simply didn't make enough effort? I'm not sure.

Gappad was an attempt to use creativity in order to establish a presence in a new world, bring creative folk together and strengthen the sense of self-worth in the Poles taking part. The fact that their experimental performances were shown on the stages of professional theatres helped validate the presence of Polish culture, language and accented speech in a world where the hegemonic role of the English language is not fading, but rather increasing in influence.³¹ It is difficult to give an overall evaluation of the quality of their artistic endeavours, but I believe that this is not of any particular significance, especially when we take into consideration just how important and valuable a role *Gappad* played for the Polish migrant community in Scotland. The company members have created a fascinating chapter of transcultural theatre belonging to the local culture, disrupting social and cultural isolation. By highlighting the dilemmas facing migrants and their sense of identity, they have brought these issues to a wider audience, demanding they be treated more fairly. They have shown that Polish migrants do not need any sort of special treatment, that they are not neighbours from a poorer country, but fully-fledged residents. In this, I see the unique, as yet unexplored, but also undervalued, worth of their theatrical and para-theatrical work.

Tu i Teraz ('Here and Now'), as the unusual rendering of the title suggests, is a bi-lingual play, written mostly, though not solely, by Nicola Werenowska. It draws attention to a very realistic approach to language, its structures and accents. All linguistic elements are scrupulously utilised in order to present a complete psychological portrait of a given character. The play maintains

31 This is confirmed by the ongoing attempts by the Polonia community to introduce the Polish language into the Scottish school curriculum, started ten years ago. Last year, plans were put in place to get rid of the Polish A-Level in 2018. Philip Oltermann, commenting on the decision in *The Guardian*, stated that: "From overseas, Britain increasingly looks like an oddity: a multicultural monoglot. Reversing AQA's decision could start to tackle that problem." See "In Praise of ... The Polish Language," *The Guardian*, 6 March, 2015, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/06/polish-language-britain-exam-board-a-level>

a realistic convention in showing a single mother (Marysia) raising a 16-year-old son (Kuba) and attempting to assimilate him completely into his English environment.

The question of Polishness is staged here in a complex way, which has been clearly affected by a larger transcultural context. We are not dealing with straightforward dilemmas but multilayered Polishness, shaped by the source of the characters' pain (Janusz's violence), as well as their joy (the kindness and generosity of spirit Anna shows her nephew Kuba). Marysia is the walking embodiment of the insecure complexity of her heritage – on the one hand, it disconnects her from actual life, and on the other it is something she is drawn towards. Her broken English, and her attempts at using it, constantly making the same old (and at times new) mistakes, becomes a metaphor for her bi-polar life. You cannot hide a foreign accent. Marysia can pretend that she has lost hers, but for everyone else it is as visible as a birthmark. Kuba's English is flawless, and from time to time he corrects his mother's errors, while she proudly displays the new bits of lexis she has picked up, such as the word "appraisal." This specific linguistic symbiosis brings them closer together, rather than sets them apart, although Marysia will not allow herself to think that it is Kuba's multi-cultural essence that is threatened by his monolingualism, and which may be far more important for his future than a perfect grasp of English.

Werenowska's play is rich material for our consideration of how migrants are stigmatised – socially, linguistically, culturally or in terms of familial relations. It shows just how complex these issues are, and makes us aware that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, that each path involves some sort of price or loss, that it can both strengthen and weaken, that the consequences of choices made cannot be fully foreseen. That which seems right and proper in one culture can come across as very awkward in another. The life of a migrant is therefore a ceaseless searching for one's own cultural *modus vivendi*, an unending search for one's own definition of the meaning of existence, an attempt to reconcile values that are often irreconcilable. Werenowska's play gives careful consideration to all these dilemmas. In Marysia's set beliefs there is no room for the idea that it is bilingualism that offers a better chance of finding employment, makes it easier to connect with people around the world, offers more choices, without even mentioning cultural and intellectual benefits. Her perceptions of Poland are negative, a perspective which, interestingly, is not representative of her whole generation – her slightly younger sister sees Poland in much rosier colours. Anna's deeply rooted connection to the Polish language and familial traditions can be perceived as a template for contemporary, apolitical patriotism. She is not seduced by those lifestyles that remain inaccessible to ordinary folk, promoted through glossy magazines

and media gossip about celebrities. Her perception of London is defined by experiences of survival at all costs, on the absolute poverty line, sustained by demeaning jobs that often go hand in hand with sexual exploitation.

Tu i Teraz ('Here and Now') is written in both languages, with a Polish translation presented in parentheses, or next to the main text, in order not to exclude anyone who is monolingual. This is undoubtedly to show a certain authenticity of experience and mimetic reflection of the world being described, but that is not all. The tangible consequence of such a decision by the author is the previously mentioned desire to create roles for bilingual actors and actresses, and, as a consequence, the facility to create work for migrants. An additional benefit of Werenowska's decision – such as with the travelling theatre *Farnham Maltings* and select performances by *Gappad* – is the equal position both languages occupy on a single stage. In certain scenes, Polish is but an echo, in others the same is true of English. This dual language aspect reflects the parallel reality outside the theatre space, because Polish has become the second most widely used tongue in the British Isles (according to official statistics). Only a few years ago, it would have been Punjabi and Urdu. There can be no doubt that a large number of Britons are multilingual, and although English continues to dominate, sensitivity to other languages and their importance in nurturing cultural traditions of various ethnic groups is taking on ever more context. Werenowska's play emphasises the essential nature of such an approach and, as was the case in previously discussed examples, helps overcome linguistic barriers and makes bilingualism or multilingualism more familiar, giving a suggested equal footing to Polish when set next to English on stage. This gesture arises out of the conviction that bilingualism in no way lessens the narrative impact or depth of the play. What is surprising is that Werenowska, as the author of the play, speaks fluent German and French, but does not speak Polish. It is her husband (emerging out of a second generation of migrants) who speaks it as his native tongue, and she was helped in the writing of the Polish section of the play (which is a translation from the English) by friends whose names are included in the published version of the play.³²

Giving food for careful thought are the differences in the way local reviewers received the performances. On the one hand, Dominic Cavendish from *The Telegraph* believes that it

divulges too little personal background and historical context for the dilemmas confronting the family here to flare into rich psychological life. In culinary terms, it's all dumplings and no meaty stew.

32 These are Anna Eliasz, Paulina Nowak and Ania Śliwa. See Nicola Werenowska, *Tu i Teraz* [*Here and Now*], Playdead Press, 2013, 3.

He also adds that “it’s nice to hear Polish being spoken in bursts, with the onus on the audience to fathom the sense, and the broken English phrasing rings true too.”³³ On the other hand, Daniel Nelson, writing for *One World*, states that

We are seeing more plays about the migrant experience in London, which is not surprising given that the country is home to 7 million foreign-born residents. The Polish community of 545,000 is the largest group of foreign nationals in the UK and the second, after India, by country of birth.³⁴

The critic mistakenly assumes that the author of the play is Polish, praises the excellent performances and ends the review by saying that “Werenowska has talent and I hope she keeps telling stories.” These opinions show how shaky and flawed artistic assessments can be, because overall they are based on a purely intuitive perception, subjective sensations and unexamined assumptions. It is also worth pondering on why reviewers do not seem to give weight to the role such productions play in the lives of migrant actors, why they overlook the human aspect of the performance, which reaches beyond the staged fiction, being simultaneously strongly connected with the socio-political reality in which they themselves live. One has the impression that their comments say more about the lack of empathy among contemporary, cosmopolitan communities than about the art itself. They are also evidence that the value of transcultural theatre rests outside illusory artistic criteria and that we are dealing with something quite different here.

Another interesting example, inspired by experiences of migration, in which we hear not just bilingualism, but a diversified multilingualism, is a play that uses the format of a musical, burlesque and tragi-comedy, along with song and dance numbers, developed by the Ukrainian emigre theatre group *Molodyi Teatr* from London. Created as a rebuke to the anti-immigrant rhetoric published by a number of British media outlets, the play is called *Bloody East Europeans* and is designed to be an interactive game with direct participation from the audience.

Here, we are dealing with a whole gamut of conventional theatrical motifs, but presented in a new context, with original staging ideas, ridiculing both sides of the argument: those arriving and those receiving. In this theatrical vision, Poles have suddenly become a part of the Slavonic family, while their

33 Dominic Cavendish, *Tu i Teraz (Here and Now)*, Hampstead Theatre, review, accessed September 10, 2015: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3670988/The-Polish-Play-Such-a-sweet-shambles.html>

34 Daniel Nelson, *Here and Now: A Story of Poles in Britain*, accessed September 10, 2015: http://www.nicolawerenowska.co.uk/nicolawerenowska.co.uk/Recent_events.html

uniqueness is reduced to words that no one is able to pronounce, such as Grzegorz Brzeczyszczkiewicz, because all their varied aspects separate them only from neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania or Belarus. This ethnic grouping is key in that it reflects an average (British) perception, in which all Slavonic countries are one and differentiating between them becomes a major challenge to the average Briton.³⁵ The general "Slavonic confusion," relating to this part of Europe is a source of humour, shown in items such as the "language" song designed to teach the audience selected words from the "Eastern European" language:

Actors line up as in a choir and sing along to the melody from Katiusha:

Zdrastvuite – is Russian for "hello"

Labadiena – Lithuanian for "good day"

Tak i Nie – is Polish for "yes/no,"

Dobre je – Ukrainian for "okay."

Other words in Eastern European:

Are poka, spasibo and duran',

Multumiri Molia Dobhre Pivo

Vybachaite, jakshcho shchos ne tak.³⁶

This specific use of "linguaging" possesses a symbolic character here, because it relates to multilingual aspects, treating the hegemonic role played by the English tongue in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. Pop hits from the 1970s are performed and sung on stage, familiar melodies accompanied by humorous lyrics illustrating the absurdity of many situations, for both British and immigrant audiences. The opening scene, showing the moment of awakening when labourers, wearing paper sacks over their heads, are getting ready for work, can be read in a symbolic way. It is not impossible to think that the authors of this play intended it to be an awakening of sorts for audiences, an opening of people's minds to the problems that surround us, to the humanity in those coming from Eastern Europe. Yet this is done without their being idealised. We see them exploiting, blackmailing and abusing each other, especially in times of hardship – and the whole dynamic of migration is contained in lively song and dance numbers, all with Slavonic accents and folk

35 Yet this is a perception mechanism that works both ways, because, for the average Pole, differentiating between England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland simply does not come into play, and during ordinary conversations (which I witnessed in Poland) the whole of the UK is referred to as "England."

36 I am quoting from the manuscript of the play, given to me by the author – EG.

costumes. Sketches, buffoonery and word games are based on an excellent grasp of Slavonic regions. All those kitschy props, including those the average Briton associates with the European East, are used to entertain the audience, though not without a hint of sadness, seriousness and gallows humour.

Along with wonderful stage management and design, delivered by Olesya Khromeychuk, the biggest strength of the show is its brilliant script. The author is introduced in the programme notes as an *Honorary Eastern European*, which he indeed is, in a way. Born in Scotland, Uilleam Blacker studied Slavonic languages in London, Glasgow and Oxford Universities, and can thus claim to speak fluent Russian, Ukrainian and Polish. Since 2014, he has been a lecturer in University College London, and his involvement in theatre is down to his partner, who set up the Ukrainian company, which he in turn supports with his talent and efforts (in this particular show, he is one of the actors playing the guitar and singing). The show offers a whole host of accents and languages, giving Ukrainian actors courage, who (not unlike *Gappad*) have to deal with the borders of culture in a British context to appeal for the right to exist and gain strength – to quote a term coined by Martha Nussbaum, used in a different context – taken from their unique “cosmopolitan belonging.”³⁷ The example set by *Molodyi Teatr* is interesting in that it illustrates the rule of cultural inclusion, rather than exclusion, through the fact that it sympathises with the whole Slavonic region. In its own way, it broadens the “cultural alphabet”³⁸ and the space of transcultural idioms, paying attention to all that binds and divides Slavonic cultures, with British culture alongside them.

In reviewing the above discussions, it is hard not to notice that one of the main aspects of the plays listed is the introduction and development of that which is more and more often termed “narrative imagination,”³⁹ along with that which other researchers refer to as “empathic imagination.”⁴⁰ This is

37 I am here referring to Martha Nussbaum’s “capabilities approach.” See *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011).

38 Azade Seyhan, in using this term, analyses diasporic literature from Germany (and Turkish Germany) which was created in the USA. See Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2001).

39 In referring to a set of “capabilities” necessary to full personal development, Martha Nussbaum introduces the category “senses, intelligence and thought,” which other researchers refer to using the term “narrative imagination,” see Nussbaum, *Capabilities*, 33.

40 Susan Gubar uses this phrase, citing an earlier idea from Shelley: “In Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, the imagination is imagined as a muscle that needs to be used. To be “greatly good,” according to Shelley, people “must imagine intensely,” putting themselves “in the

a form of the imagination that is meant to facilitate the most complete understanding of another's situation, a situation that may be completely alien to readers and audiences, and totally outside their realm of interest. There can be doubt that all the shows discussed here are strongly related to the contexts in which they were created and out of which they emerge, hence it is not really possible to apply a typology based solely on the choice of language, the nationality of the authors, or simple cultural identity, because each spectacle is a borderline phenomenon. Even the typology proposed by Edward Balcerzan, taking into account the presence of many languages in one work of theatrical art, does not make it easier to contain, because the observations by researchers relate to the works of a single, specific author in Polish literature, and hence in works that are printed, not performed live, and that substantially changes the semantic scope of our deliberations.⁴¹

Each of the theatrical works considered here creates, in its own way, new values on the edges of cultures and languages. The mixing up of cultures and languages is not, however, an artistic aim in and of itself, but clearly relates to a human dimension so typical of our times, defined by the phenomenon of mobility. The multilingual texts of these shows ask ambitious questions, and also teach us humility, returning some measure of dignity to the "Other," and making us more sensitive, empathic and able to engage in mutual respect, and it is in these aspects that I see their value and importance.

Who knows if we are not dealing here with the nucleus of a phenomenon that is reminiscent of Chicano culture, which came out of the mixing of American culture, languages and traditions with those of Mexican and Spanish origins. Chicano has earned its own name and separate fields of study. Perhaps a similarly comparative form of analysis will be the aim of further research into this entangled and fascinating phenomenon of the creation of new cultural affiliations – the inevitable result of an ever more globalised world.

Translation: Marek Kazmierski

place of another and of many others" so the "pains and pleasures of the species become their own." See. Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz. Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 242.

⁴¹ See Balcerzan, "Dwu(wielu)języczność."